

Chapter 7

The Sam Nail Ranch

"I don't want to borrow trouble"

Big Bend, Brewster County, Texas

James Henry (Jim) Nail (August 7, 1874 – February 18, 1933) and Samuel Robert (Sam) Nail (January 3, 1878 – March 28, 1958) were born near Prairie Grove, Arkansas but later moved with their family to Grayson County, Texas about 1886. The family later lived in Archer County where both the mother, Esper Ann Branson Nail, and the grandmother, Eliza Adair Nail, died. Their father, William Robert Nail, then moved the remainder of his family to Baylor County, Texas and established a farm near Seymour. Sometime prior to 1908 William Nail moved the remaining family to a ranch near Menard, Menard County, Texas. The brothers Jim and Sam, remained behind and continued to live in Baylor County. The remaining family members left the Menard area in June of 1908 and settled on an established ranch at Government Springs in what is now the Big Bend Park.¹

Like others of that era searching for new opportunities, Jim and Sam left Baylor County and moved to Brewster County in the Big Bend area in 1909.¹ They camped for a while near Dugout Wells before moving to the Pine Canyon area (originally called Nail Canyon), which is on the southeast side of the Chisos Mountains. At the end of World War I in what was considered a booming time for ranching,² the two brothers purchased 13,187 acres or 20.6 sections which lay on top of Burro Mesa and settled in what is now known as the Sam Nail Ranch.³ The brothers also leased additional acreage from neighbors close by Burro Mesa. The Nail ranch was west of Homer Wilson's Blue Creek Ranch below Burro Mesa. They constructed a two-room adobe house and later added another room and a porch, hand dug a water well, planted fruit trees and put in a garden.⁴



Nail Ranch, Chisos Mountains, 24 " x 36", Oil on Canvas, Circa late 1930's, Collection of Julia Nail Moss

The Nail brothers were famous in that area for their fast and long-distance walking. They would often throw their satchels on the mail hack as it passed by, then started hiking ahead of the coach. Many times, the walking Nail brothers beat the mail to Alpine, a trip of over ninety miles.

Jim Nail married and relocated to Alpine leaving

the house below Burro Mesa to Sam and his soon to be wife, Nena Sadie Lee Burnham, daughter of Waddy Burnham, Sr. Sam and Nena were married on June 18, 1918 at her mother's home in Marathon. They went from there to Burro Mesa in a surrey drawn by two mules. The fringe around the top swayed as Nena carried her belongings to begin their new life together.⁵ Nena had her own piano that was transported in a wagon at a later date. Once in the Big Bend, it was put to good use during many social occasions held at the ranch.

The Nail marriage of Sam and Nena produced two children. Robert (Bob Tack) Thompson Nail was born April 18th, 1919 – died April 20th, 1928 from complications of the measles and Julia, (born May 30th, 1921). Patricia Wilson always considered Julia her big sister because of the gentle kindness and attention she continually showed her. Julia was a favorite of many.

Many isolated ranches, lacking close access to a school, relied on live-in teachers who worked for room and board and a nominal salary, teaching the few local children. The nearest school was miles south of the Chisos Mountains in the San Vicente School District. Julia was home-schooled on the ranch for three years by three different teachers. Miss Florence Pope, a recent master's degree graduate from Sul Ross State Teachers College, taught Julia and her neighbor Patricia Wilson.⁶ As children became high school age, some of the families purchased or rented homes in Alpine and the wives and children would live in town during the school year.

Florence Pope dedicated her life to education along with her friend and associate teacher Georgia Clements. The two educators found positions with the Monahans-Wickett-Pyote, Texas ISD as the first bilingual teachers. Their positions came about because school administrators were concerned over the high number of Hispanic students dropping out of school. Hispanic elementary students were moved to a small schoolhouse, so the two teachers could help them learn English while they studied other subjects and learned at their own pace. They also formed the first Spanish PTA. The school district honored both by building a new campus and renaming the school from East Ward to Clements-Pope Elementary.⁷



Bay Horse, Nail Ranch, 12" x 16", Oil on Masonite, Circa late 1930's, Collection of Daughters of the Republic of Texas

The Nail Ranch raised cattle, horses, sheep, and goats, with the Hereford breed of cattle generally being preferred for their hardiness and ability to better endure the harsh climate of the Chihuahuan Desert. In addition to their livestock, Sam was fond of horses, which he would rent out to government workers and others who began coming into the area around 1933 when the state began talking about acquiring property.⁸ There is little information available concerning how successful the ranch was financially. Sam Nail was faced with the same problems as his neighbors. He was fighting an uphill battle with a

depression and a drought going on at the same. The commodities he was raising were selling for less than his costs of operation. Agriculture in the 1930's was almost a no-win operation. The good times were far and few.

The talks between landowners and representatives of the State of Texas for the National Park Service continued up through the early 1940's. Although there were mixed feelings about selling their land to the State of Texas for the National Park Service, the Great Depression and the continuous drought were too much for the many ranchers and settlers to endure. Many decided to make the ultimate decision to sell and leave the area, including Sam Nail and his family. ⁹

Waddy Burnham, Jr. had fond memories of his brother-in-law, Sam Nail. They would often drink coffee together early in the mornings several days a week.



Sam Nail Portrait, 32" X 24" Oil on Canvas Board, Circa late 1930's, Collection of Julia Nail Moss

Sam Nail will always be remembered as a pipe smoker. His pipe was with him at all times. Waddy Burnham, Jr., Nena's brother, was famed for his attitude of always looking at the brighter and funnier side of everything. From the 1920's to the 30's was a period of time the Mexicans were not all that friendly or funny. They made several attempts to come across the Rio Grande border and take the country over. The ranchers were not only having to work their ranches, but they had to fend themselves from the Mexicans trying to take the country over.

When the Mexicans raided Bouquillas and Glenn Springs May 5-6, 1916 and killed 4 Americans and took two hostages back across the border to Coahuila, Waddy Burnham, Jr. and his brother-in-law, Sam Nail, went to Glenn Springs to help with reinforcements to defend the U.S. side of the border. Waddy and Sam had not been there too long before Sam had to get his pipe lighted up. About the time he got it lighted, one of the opposing Mexicans fired a shot and just missed Sam by about a foot.

*Startled Sam, bit the stem of his pipe off. Waddy always enjoyed telling that story about his brother-in-law Sam.*¹⁰

Julia Nail Moss' memories of her father:

"It is very difficult for me to describe my father. He was a hard-working man with a lot of responsibilities, but also had a lot of wit and loved to tell stories. He was a serious man, but he was fun loving also. My father used to joke with Fred Darge and ask him to grow some leather on his saddle and Fred would just grin. His stern look makes him look too serious. I think that eyes must be extremely difficult to portray. This portrait was an experiment of Fred Darge's. He did not normally do portraits at that time. Most of the people he depicted in the paintings I have seen

could have been one of the many cowboys some of them look like my cousins, Bill Burnham, but it is mostly the clothing and style of hat that make them look like Bill.”

“The older I get the more I appreciate my father and the things he was able to accomplish with what he had and under the circumstances in which he lived. He grew up in a family of five. His father was a farmer, so what he accumulated, at that time, he did it on his own”. Julia Nail Moss-

Daughter 01/20/2018 ¹¹



Sam Nail, Nail Ranch, 12" x 16", Oil on Masonite, Circa late 1930's, Collection of Daughters of the Republic of Texas

Upon the sale of the Nail Ranch to the State of Texas for the National Park Service, Sam Nail purchased two smaller ranches in Brewster County and took up where he left off in the Park area. The first ranch is now in the Black Gap Wildlife Management Area which is part of the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department. It previously was owned by Otto Walker and the Walker family. The second ranch Sam Nail purchased was the 15,000-acre Chalk Draw Ranch previously owned by Nolan Schuler ¹² and was later sold to Mr. J. P. Bryan of Houston who also purchased the historic Gage Hotel in Marathon in 1978.

The Gage Hotel was where Homer Wilson stayed while purchasing the acreage for his Blue Creek Ranch next to the Nail Ranch. The history of the Gage Hotel is extraordinary by any standards. In 1878, at the age of 18, Alfred Gage left his home in Vermont with little more than a twenty-dollar gold piece in his pocket to seek the promise of the vast ranching opportunity that was emerging in Texas. Four years later the town of Marathon was founded when the Galveston, Harrisburg and San Antonio Railroad arrived. Early settler, Captain Albion E. Shepard, who worked as a surveyor for the railroad, bought land in the area and applied for the post office in 1882. Shepard named the site Marathon because its terrain reminded him of the plains of Marathon, Greece where he previously traveled as a ship captain. The rugged mountainous terrain was open ranch country, accessible only by horseback and wagon via dirt roads or rail. Gage saw opportunity and had a big vision, which lead him over the next few decades to amass a ranching empire of over 500,000 acres. That equates to 781.25 sections. A section is equivalent to a square mile. This is big even for Texas.

In those days, Marathon did not offer much in terms of lodging, so eventually Gage decided to build a hotel to use as a base of operation to oversee his vast ranching empire. In 1926, he commissioned renowned El Paso architect, Henry Trost, to design and build the property. An excellent example of Mission and Spanish style design, the hotel opened for business in April of 1927. Sadly, Alfred Gage died just one year after the opening of this remarkable hotel which is now an historic Texas landmark. ¹³

Samuel Robert Nail died March 28, 1958 at age 80. Nena Sadie Lee Burnham Nail died on Wednesday, August 12, 1970 of esophageal cancer, the same malady that caused her father's death, at 67 years of age. Julia had recently heard that Darge was in the Park painting. She

managed to get word to him that her mother had died and the funeral would be on Saturday, August 15th. Never let it be said that Fred Darge didn't remember his friends. He attended Nena Nail's funeral and talked with Julia after the services. This was the last time these two long-time friends would see each other.¹⁴ To this day Julia Nail remembers Darge well.

In the early years of settlement of the Big Bend there were no telephones or housing facilities available for visiting travelers, so they invited themselves. The Nail family, like many others in the Big Bend, would frequently receive visitors. Unfortunately, not all of them, for lack of a better word were "wanted." Especially when they just dropped in uninvited with no warning beforehand. Ranchers and their wives had no choice but to scurry around and provide for new arrivals sometimes not even knowing how long they would be a guest. Even though the unannounced visitors were often an imposition, it did offer the household the opportunity to get caught up on the latest news outside of the Big Bend area. And, it was an opportunity for Sam to rent out horses to state and other government officials and others who were there to see the proposed park area.



Nena Burnham Nail's Kitchen, 12" x 8" Oil on Canvas Board Circa Late 1930's, Collection of Julia Nail Moss

The kitchen, as always, was the most important room in the house. Darge understood the importance of the kitchen. When he visited the Nail ranch when painting in the Big Bend, Nena's kitchen was where his meals came from.

We are not sure why Darge took it upon himself to do this unusual painting other than he liked the bright colors or maybe the good meals it produced. Maybe it was both. Remember that age old saying, "a way to a man's heart is through his stomach." Then again it could have been an offhand remark that Nena could have made to Darge that spurred him into action. Considering the amount of time Nena spent every day cooking for her family, visitors and

ranch hands, it was the equivalent of her office. This memorable painting was given to Julia Nail as a wedding gift from Fred. Julia's own words described it as, "a lovely surprise."

When Nena's daughter, Julia Nail Moss, was asked to describe Fred Darge, she replied:

"Fred Darge was always pleasant to be around. He was extremely private, never once mentioning that he had a child. He talked very little but enjoyed being around people and enjoyed being teased. His German accent was pronounced, but we had no trouble understanding him. He was very

generous with his paintings - using them in payment for his room and board. We thought his colors were the best of any artist in the area. So many of the local artists used garish colors.” Julia Nail Moss-Daughter 01/06/2018 ¹⁵

The years of Darge’s visits to the Nail’s ranch were years of one of the worst economic downturns ever experienced in the United States. The Dust Bowl added misery to the already life in the remote Big Bend. The ranch that Sam had poured his heart, body and soul into provided sustenance for the family and visitors. Darge was always welcomed with open arms.



Bill Burnham, Julia Nail and Waddy T. Burnham on the Bank of Rio Grande River, Burnham Family Archive Photographs.

